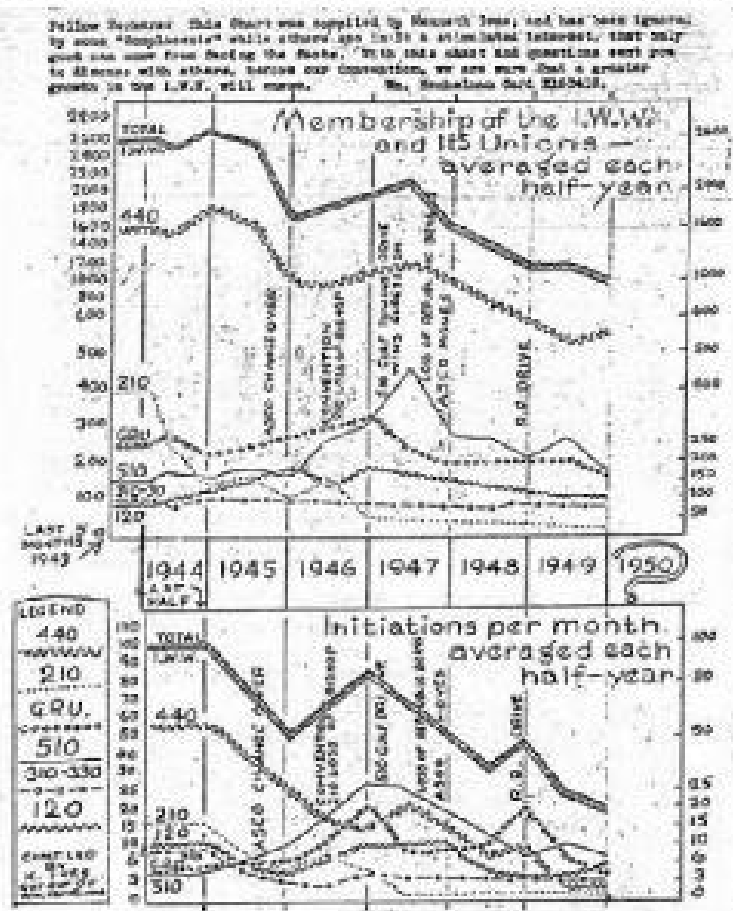


In November we remember

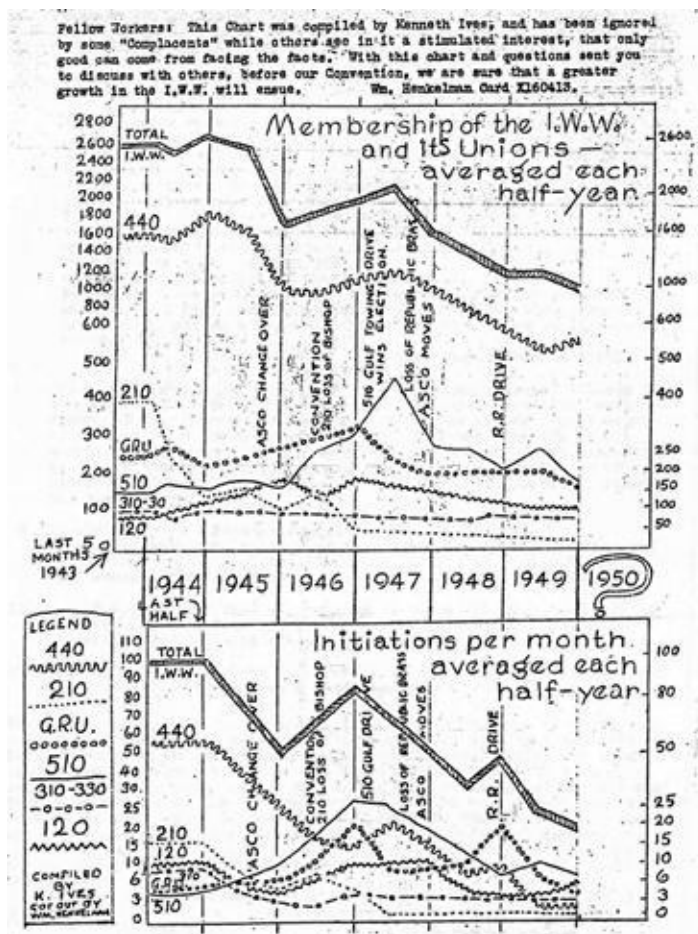


An article by Colin Bossen about the IWW's decline and if there are lessons to learn from that period today.

For more than 100 years it has been a Wobbly tradition to remember all of those who gave their lives to struggle for a better world during the month of November. The historian Franklin Rosemont argued that this tradition predates the founding of the IWW itself, and harkens back to remembering the Haymarket martyrs. In his essay, "In November We Remember: The IWW & the Commemoration of Haymarket," he quotes an unnamed Wobbly writer that this tradition, "gives a sense of continuity to the struggle of workers, not only from year to year but from generation to generation."

As a young Wobbly in the late 1990s, I felt a palpable connection to that tradition when I joined the San Francisco General Membership Branch. One of the elder members, Franklin Devore, had been the long-time lover of the legendary soap-boxer San Francisco Phil Mellman. Mellman was credited with mastering the art of “windmilling.” That was the practice of speaking rapidly and dramatically in public to attract attention for the IWW cause. A windmiller like Mellman would stand at a street corner and broadcast as much Wobbly wisdom as possible before the cops came. In the 1910s and 1920s, windmilling was an effective way to spread the Wobbly gospel.

I learned a lot about Wobbly culture, history and philosophy from elders like Devore. I was privileged to know Utah Phillips and Carlos Cortez, and Wobblies who joined the union in the



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1960s and early 1970s like Mike Hargis, Jon Bekken, Penny Pixler, F. N. Brill and Neil McLean all passed on to me the lessons that they learned from Wobbly elders.

Recently though, I have been wondering if I learned the wrong lessons from those elders. The lessons that they taught me were primarily about the IWW’s dramatic successes: our successes organizing migrant workers in the forests and in the agricultural fields; our victories in the free speech fights in San Diego and Spokane; and our dramatic strikes in Lawrence and Lowell.

The narratives of those successes were frequently matched by the narratives around the IWW’s decline. I learned three. One was that the union was essentially destroyed around 1919 when the U.S. government jailed the majority of IWW leaders. A second was that the union’s demise came about in 1924 when it split into two factions around a debate over centralization vs. decentralization, to generalize. The third was that the union survived these two catastrophes, saw its membership recover in the 1930s with organizing amongst metal workers in Cleveland, only to finally collapse in the wake of a refusal to sign McCarthy-era loyalty oaths.

A couple of weeks ago I received some pages from the August 1950 edition of the IWW’s internal publication, the General Organizing Bulletin (GOB), that has me rethinking these narratives. A graph from that GOB depicts the union’s membership in a free fall from 1943 to 1949. Over the course of six years the union lost more than 60 percent of its membership.

This means that by the time the loyalty oath controversy caused the Cleveland

branch to leave the union it was already in an institutional death spiral.

Accompanying the graph is a list of 20 questions drafted by William Henkleman and Kenneth Ives, entitled “Groups of Questions on IWW Problems and Policies.” One group of questions runs:

“Can the IWW make progress best by:

a) Trying to educate and organize individuals, isolated workers as it mostly has done in recent decades..? (sic)

b) Trying to organize individual shops, as we have some times done in the last fifteen years..?

(sic)

c) Trying to educate within some independent unions, such as the Confederated Unions Group..? (sic)

d) Trying to set up an affiliated but self-supporting organization for education as distinct from propaganda... for former members, sympathizers and other workers want to study the extension of workers control and operation, union democracy, etc., who may feel that the IWW as a union can't help them on their present job..? (sic)

e) Or some combination of those programs..? (sic)

For each of the above methods, what amount of activity by members, what skills, what trained organizers, what funds, what programs are needed, and what types of situations will these be likely to succeed in..? (sic)”

When I read these questions I thought that they were quite contemporary. That observation, coupled with the 1940s membership statistics, has prompted me to ask: How can we learn from the IWW's failures? The IWW's membership now is close to what it was in the early 1940s. Our organizing over the last decade-and-a-half has been quite similar to the organizing that Henkleman and Ives complained about in 1950. It has been targeted at individuals and individual shops, and it is rarely industrial.

This observation leads me to want to know how we can break these patterns.

They have haunted our union for most of its existence. They are as much a part of our legacy as the wonderful stories we tell about free speech fights and textile strikes. Studying our failures is the way we learn not to repeat them. This November, instead of just celebrating the rich legacy of the IWW, take time in your branch or at your workplace to think about the ways in which you have been stuck in your organizing. Look to our organization's failures and ask the question: What could have been done differently to avoid the mistakes that were made? It is not an easy question to ask but in its answer may lie what we need to move the IWW up from 2,000 to 100,000 members. And that would be the best way to remember all of our Fellow Workers.

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